

## We All Get Angry

8 ways to change your response.

by Heidi Smith Luedtke


**T**hough it may be unpleasant, anger isn't all bad. Harriet Lerner, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and author of "The Dance of Anger," said anger is a potential source of power and strength.

"It can teach us to take action and give us the courage to speak out and take a stand," Lerner said.

Anger can't work for you if you

fight about the wrong issues or pick battles you can't win. No one wins the blame game either. Be patient with yourself and your spouse as you try out a new response to angry feelings. Change occurs slowly in marriage, especially when patterns are well-established.

When you make a change, even a small one, your partner may resist or fight back to see if you "really

mean it." Hold your position even if your partner's reaction is disapproval. If you respond to anger thoughtfully and stay focused on the loving relationship you want to create with your spouse, things will change for the better. Just remember, it's the direction you move in and not the speed of travel that matters, Lerner said. 





## THE COSTS OF ANGER

Duke University researcher Dr. Redford Williams said the outcomes of uncontrolled anger can be severe.

**HEALTH** - Anger increases your risk for heart disease by raising heart rate, blood pressure, and cholesterol levels. Stress hormones released during hostile encounters also interfere with immune functioning, making you more susceptible to illness and less able to heal. Hostility also increases unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, overeating, and alcohol abuse.

**PERCEPTIONS** - Staying angry skews your perceptions. It's like wearing a pair of goggles that only let you see what's wrong with everyone else. This can make you hypercritical and set you up for even more angry confrontations.

**RELATIONSHIPS** - When you're chronically angry, others can't get close to you because they worry they'll set you off if they say or do the wrong thing. The consequence? You miss out on the social support you need when times are tough and set yourself up for added stress.



## How to Change Your Response to Anger

Ultimately, to use anger productively you've got to recognize that your angry feelings are yours and yours alone. You cannot change other people, but you can change your response to anger, your decisions and actions. Here's how to do it.

### 1. Simmer down.

The worst time to react is when you're still feeling angry or intense, Lerner cautioned. Step away from the situation mentally (and even physically) and give yourself time to calm down.

### 2. Unearth real issues.

Ask yourself "What am I really angry about?" Anger is often a signal that we are doing too much or taking responsibility for things we can't control. It may indicate we've failed to set boundaries in important relationships or to speak up for our own interests. Before you act on your anger, make sure you know why you feel the way you do.

### 3. Acknowledge your contribution to the problem.

Even if you've done nothing wrong, your behavior has helped to create the pattern you're in with your spouse. Consider what you can do differently. Once you've clarified what you feel, think and want, you can decide on your next move and act calmly.

### 4. Clarify your position.

Before you speak up, consider your own beliefs and priorities. Ask yourself "What do I want to accomplish? What are the things I will and will not do? What aspects of this relationship are not negotiable to me?" If you aren't sure where you stand, you aren't in a good position to effect change.

### 5. Speak up.

When an issue is important to you, the benefits of speaking up outweigh the potential risks. "It's an act of maturity to be able to lighten up and let things go," Lerner said, "but it's a mistake to stay silent if doing so will make you bitter and resentful."

### 6. Fight fair.

You're likely to be tuned out or disregarded if you use below-the-belt tactics, Lerner said. Blaming, labeling, analyzing, preaching, ridiculing or lecturing your spouse is counterproductive. Be respectful.

### 7. Avoid salesmanship.

Don't try to change your spouse or convince them that you are right or they should see things your way. "It's not possible," Lerner said. It is better to accept the fact that you disagree and move on from there. Intimacy isn't synonymous with sameness – loving partners can disagree.

### 8. Watch your tone.

Use lightness and humor when appropriate. To change a pattern or take a new position with your spouse is a serious matter, but you don't need to speak in a heavy, angry tone. Be positive and upbeat as much as possible.

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